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ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXX / 2019

Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni**

viella

A large, faint, light-blue mandala design is visible in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text and the dark blue background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

FOREWORD

ASIA IN 2019: THE ESCALATION OF THE US-CHINA CONTRAPOSITION, AND THE AUTHORITARIAN INVOLUTION OF ASIAN SOCIETIES

No meaningful analysis of the continuing political and economic evolution of Asia can avoid focusing on the increasingly evident and increasingly dangerous contraposition between a declining superpower – the US – and a rising one – China. Also, the point must be stressed beyond any possible doubt that, at least up to the moment in which this Foreword is being penned, the declining power, the US, is still overwhelming powerful and, more importantly, overwhelmingly more so than its competitor, China. As noted elsewhere¹ – there is every reason to believe that, under Donald Trump's dysfunctional and intellectually opaque leadership, the decline of the US has accelerated. Nonetheless, US resources remain such that it would be unwarranted to expect either an imminent collapse of US power, or even a decline of such significance to endanger the US position of most-powerful world nation. As history teaches us, the decline of imperial powers – as shown by the examples of Rome, Spain, and Britain – are long-drawn, centuries-long affairs. Even if history moves today much faster than before, there is every reason to think that the collapse of US power is far from being imminent.²

The contraposition between the US and China has long been in the making, but it was only during the concluding years of Barack Obama's presidency that the consensus in Washington on China finally and decisively shifted. The idea that China had to be engaged as a constructive strategic partner and a responsible stakeholder in the US-dominated world order was then discarded. The view accepted in its stead was that the Asian giant was an increasingly dangerous, unrelenting strategic adversary, whose clear ambition was the conquest of world hegemony through the subversion of the existing, US-centred world order. As such, China, far from being engaged as a friendly country, had to be confronted and faced down.³

During Obama's second term, the new adversarial consensus on China found expression in a well-reasoned and coherent grand policy,

1. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2017: The unravelling of the US foreign policy in Asia and its consequences', *Asia Maior* 2017, p. 8.

2. For a discussion of this question, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Premessa: Declino e continuità dell'egemonia americana in Asia', *Asia Maior* 2009, pp. 9-31.

3. Ashley J. Tellis, 'The Return of U.S.-China Strategic Competition', in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, & Michael Willis (eds.), 'U.S.-China competition for global influence', Seattle and Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019 (also available on the web at https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sa20_overview_tellis_dec2019advance.pdf).

based on two pillars: the «Pivot to Asia», namely the redeployment of the bulk of US military forces in the Asia-Pacific area, and the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership), a 12-country free trade agreement.⁴ The TPP aimed at establishing a set of US-decided new rules, which would not only any future economic interexchange in the Asia-Pacific but the working itself of the local economies. Its *political* aim was the imposition of these new, US-made rules on China, by confronting Beijing with the dilemma of either accepting the Washington-dictated rules, entering the gigantic free market created by the TPP, or being excluded from it, with heavy – and possibly disastrous – negative consequences for its economy.⁵

Trump's presidency did not see the transition from a China policy based on engagement to a different one, one centred on active containment, but, rather, the transformation of an already existing confrontational policy. This transformation, nonetheless, was highlighted as a startlingly new policy, which extended the «America First» political approach, espoused by Donald Trump during his electoral campaign, to the field of foreign relations.

The claim that the new President's foreign policy charted a «new course», aimed at «putting the interests and security of the American people first»,⁶ was made credible above all by his particular and flamboyant personal style. This claim was so effectively advertised that, by the year under review, many analysts and commentators appeared to have become convinced that a new cold war, based on the US-China confrontation, had begun.⁷ In fact, if a new cold war began, it happened not under the Trump administration but under that of his predecessor.

Once the continuity in the Trump administration's China policy as compared with the preceding administration has been underlined, it is nonetheless important to clarify the distinctive features of the «America First» anti-China Trumpian strategy. These were many,⁸ but for the purpose of putting in perspective the essays included in this volume, only two will be highlighted.

4. In 2016 the TPP included Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States.

5. Francesca Congiu, 'China in 2014: China and the Pivot to Asia', *Asia Maior* 2014, pp. 15-41.

6. The White House, Fact Sheets, *President Donald J. Trump's Foreign Policy Puts America First*, 30 January 2018.

7. Some analysts claimed that 2019 marked the actual starting point of the new Cold War between the two countries. See, e.g., Robert D. Kaplan, 'A New Cold War Has Begun', *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2019; Niall Ferguson, 'The New Cold War? It's With China, and It Has Already Begun', *The New York Times*, 2 December 2019; Minghao Zhao, 'Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 12, 3, 2019, pp. 371-394.

8. Ashley J. Tellis – calling them «avenues of resistance» (to China's aggressive challenge to «overall U.S. hegemony in the international system») – lists no less than six distinctive features of Trump's anti-China policy. Ashley J. Tellis, 'The Return of U.S.-China Strategic Competition', pp. 11, 26-31.

The first and most visible hallmark of the transformation of the US China policy under Trump was the abandonment of any caution in highlighting the administration's confrontational stand vis-à-vis China. Contrary to the caution which had surrounded the enunciation of the Obamian anti-China policy – which, to a certain extent, had disguised its real objective, namely taming what had come to be seen as the US' main world competitor – the fact that the US now viewed China as a strategic rival was, so to speak, shouted from the rooftops.

The other hallmark of the transformation of the US China policy under Trump was the abrupt jettisoning of the economic containment network that Barack Obama had been building around China through the TPP. This decision, in line with Donald Trump's anti-globalist and anti-multilateral pacts inclination, was coupled with the reliance on the threat of overwhelming military force, strengthened by a series of bilateral military pacts with those Asian countries which felt threatened by China's rise.

Openly branding China as the most dangerous strategic rival of the US began soon after Trump's election. As pointed out in the Foreword to the previous *Asia Maior* volume, it was made clear beyond any possible doubt in a series of public statements and official documents: the speech on US-India relations, given by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (18 October 2017), the publication of the new document on the National Security Strategy (NSS) (18 December 2017), and then-US Secretary of Defense James Mattis' public enunciation of the summary of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) (19 January 2018).⁹ To these statements and documents – already discussed in the Foreword to the previous *Asia Maior* issue – one must add the publication, in November 2019, of the Department of State's *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*. In it, the US approach to «an Indo-Pacific composed of open societies and open markets» was counterpoised to that of China, based on the practice of repression «at home and abroad».¹⁰ The *Vision* was especially critical of the repressive practices which, according to the document, the People's Republic of China employed «at home and abroad». According to the *Vision*: «Such practices, which Beijing exports to other countries through its political and economic influence, undermine the conditions that have promoted stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific for decades».¹¹ The reference to Beijing's «political and eco-

9. On the 2017 NSS document see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2017: The unravelling of the US foreign policy in Asia and its consequences', *Asia Maior* 2017, p. 15; on the NSS of 18 December 2017 and the presentation of the summary of the NDS of 19 January 2018, see Michelguglielmo Torri & Nicola Mocci, 'Foreword. Asia Maior in 2018: Caught between Trump's trade and sanctions war and the internal problems of inequality and exploitation', *Asia Maior* 2018, pp. 9-10.

10. US Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*, 4 November 2019, p. 21.

11. *Ibid.*

conomic influence» was a not-so-veiled critique of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), seen by Washington as Beijing's attempt to create a sphere of influence based on radically different values than the ones advanced by the US.

The jetisoning of the TPP promotion, namely the second hallmark highlighting the transformation of the US' China policy under Trump, also became apparent immediately after the election of the new President. Although in line with the aforementioned Trumpian aversion of globalisation and disdain for multinational pacts and organisations, it was a frankly disconcerting decision. There is every reason to think that it was seen with dismay even by some ruling circles in Washington. Certainly, the reintroduction of some form of US economic support to the Asian countries within the US political sphere of influence was welcomed by most US decision makers and, indeed, realised, although in a limited fashion, in 2018.¹² The attempt to find some economic props for the Trumpian US' China policy was however *de facto* undermined by the President himself. A great deal of political and scholarly attention has been devoted to the fact that one of the highlights of the Trumpian foreign policy was the trade war on China, started in 2018 by the US President with his decision to impose tariffs on imported industrial and technology goods from the East Asian country. The focus on China, however, often obscures the fact that China, while the main target of the trade war unleashed by Trump, was far from being the only one. The trade war was simply part of Trump's «America first» policy, which the US President and his administration pursued not only against China but all nations with a favourable commercial balance vis-à-vis the US. Hence, Washington's goal became that of forcing the «erring» countries to tilt their trade balance towards parity, lest they risk the imposition of punitive tariffs on their imports. This amounted to the unleashing of a trade war not only on China, but on most US formal allies and non-treaty partners in the Indo-Pacific region, and could not but make redundant the limited programme of economic support launched in place of the TPP, and endanger Washington's relations with most of its Asian formal and informal allies.¹³



During the year under review, since the start of the US policy of China containment, Beijing determinedly moved to counter Washington's increasingly confrontational posture, both at the rhetoric and factual level, in Asia and world-wide.

At the rhetorical level, Beijing argued that the trade imbalance with the US, in its favour, was the natural result of free trade rather than unfair practices, as alleged by the US. Also, Beijing constantly rejected claims that

12. Michelguglielmo Torri & Nicola Mocci, 'Foreword. Asia Maior in 2018', p. 11.

13. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Asia Maior in 2017: The unravelling of the US foreign policy in Asia and its consequences', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 9-11.

the BRI represented an expansionist economic and ultimately military endeavour. As noted by Barbara Onnis in her comprehensive assessment of the major developments in Chinese foreign policy in 2019, the Chinese leadership made use of the 2nd BRI forum held in Beijing (25-27 April 2019) both to showcase the BRI acceptance by major international organisations and consultation fora, such as G20 and the World Bank, and to challenge the US narrative of the BRI being a «debt trap» for the countries involved in it.

The 2019 White Paper *China's National Defense in the New Era* was another example of Beijing's attempt to highlight its outlook on the most pressing international and domestic matters. With regards to its own global ambitions, the document stated that «China will never follow the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony» and that it «will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence».¹⁴ With specific reference to the US, and how China perceives its moves, the White Paper stated that, as international competition was growing, the US «has provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability.»¹⁵

On a practical level, during the year under review President Xi Jinping was engaged in what Barbara Onnis describes as a «tireless summit diplomacy», which saw the Chinese leader travelling throughout the world and attending «hundreds of bilateral and multilateral meetings».

Among them, the Chinese President's visit to Russia in June 2019 deserves particular mention, as this visit marked the apex of years of growing economic and military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. Beyond the long-standing cooperation channelled through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Sino-Russian partnership featured regular joint military exercises as well as an ever-stronger energy collaboration in both the oil and gas sectors. While it is unclear at the time of writing whether or not the Sino-Russian *entente* will transform into a fully-fledged alliance, it nevertheless represented a key geopolitical alignment that brought together two of the most prominent revisionist powers in global geopolitics.¹⁶

Beyond the Russian case, the results of Xi's diplomatic activism in the year under review are, however, a contentious point. According to Barbara Onnis, they were «both positive and negative». «While Xi Jinping was successful in pursuing personal relations with his Indian and Japanese counterparts, that could be used to address the trust deficit with both the

14. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China's National Defense in the New Era', July 2019, p. 8.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Marcin Kaczmarek, 'The Moscow-Beijing Relationship: Increasingly Asymmetrical and Resilient', *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 2 July 2019; Lyle J. Goldstein, 'The Fate of the China-Russia Alliance', *The National Interest*, 25 January 2020.

neighbouring countries – points out Onnis – the same cannot be said for the Chinese government's attempt to reassure one of its most relevant partners, namely the EU». Here, however, the problem is that good «personal relations» appear to be a widely overrated element in assessing the actual state of relations between sovereign countries. To be convinced of this it is enough to refer to the strange case of the continuing allegedly good personal relations between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping in a period when, according to most analysts and commentators, the increasingly adversarial relations between their respective countries had become so extreme as to justify the judgement that a new cold war had begun.

No doubt, in 2018 Trump's policy of forcing countries with a favourable balance of trade vis-à-vis the US to tilt their trade balance towards parity provoked the ill-concealed negative reaction of some key US allies or quasi-allies, in particular Japan and India. It was a negative reaction which opened the possibility of an international realignment on the part of Tokyo and New Delhi, characterised by a more or less deliberate move away from the US sphere of influence and a parallel gradual thawing of relations with China. Xi Jinping's diplomatic effort to bridge the historical gap separating China from Japan and India addressed the disquiet felt because of Trump's aggressive trade policies, and was designed to promote personal good relations with both Shinzō Abe and Narendra Modi.

Xi Jinping's attempted rapprochement, however, although ostensibly impressive, was short in substance. In fact, as Giulio Pugliese and Sebastian Maslow argue in this Asia Maior issue, in 2019 Japan's foreign policy was characterised by an ever-closer relationship with the US, while simultaneously maintaining the country's security agenda squarely focused on how to engage and contain China. Accordingly, the limited 2019 Sino-Japanese rapprochement was coupled with an unprecedented level of engagement between Japanese Prime Minister Abe and US President Trump. As pointed out by Pugliese and Maslow, the «Japanese government was mostly satisfied with the Trump administration's foreign and security policy recalibration, and essentially welcomed America's more confrontational China policy». Clearly, during 2019, Washington and Tokyo appeared aligned on a number of issues, primarily on their interpretation of the BRI, especially its maritime component, as a geopolitical endeavour aimed at strengthening Beijing's economic and, in the long run, military clout in the Indo-Pacific.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept – at the core of the Trump administration's Asia policy – provided a common ground for cementing also the ties between India and the US. As Yogesh Joshi argues in his article, the strategic relationship between New Delhi and Washington – which in 2018 had appeared to be threatened by the US aggressive trade policies – recovered during 2019, it being strengthened notably through a 2+2 ministerial dialogue, bringing together the foreign and defence ministers of both countries. In spite of the novel good personal climate characterising the

Xi-Modi relations ever since 2018, any real progress in India's relations with China remained hostage to territorial disputes and appeared hampered by a growing Sino-Pakistani partnership (its most visible manifestation being the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor). According to Joshi's appraisal, in the year under review India unambiguously sided with the US in the global struggle for hegemony. Interestingly, this happened after a period in 2018 which saw India doubt the wisdom of maintaining its US connection as the keystone of its foreign policy. It is worth stressing that, in firmly siding with Washington in 2019, New Delhi made the choice of favouring a policy which advanced the expansion of its own military power, rather than its economic interests. But, significantly, overlooking a declining economy and focusing instead on the pursuit of political goals related to its own brand of «Hindu nationalism» is what, during the year under review, characterised the Modi government's policies, even domestically.



In the end, in 2019 Beijing's effort at countering Washington's strategy of containment had limited or disappointing results as far as China's relations with the EU, Japan and India were concerned. However, in the year under review as in previous years, the Sino-US rivalry took place in a series of other geographical theatres, where its results were sometimes different.

Outside India, in South Asia the Sino-US competition mainly played out in two contexts, Pakistan and Nepal. With regards to the former, it is worth stressing once again that Pakistan is at the very heart of China's BRI strategy, as shown by the planning of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC is a set of infrastructural and energy investments worth around US\$ 20 billion, whose political and economic implications, analysed by Marco Corsi in this and previous Asia Maior issues, are hard to overestimate. Given its relevance on the wider global chessboard, CPEC and the related investment practices have been the object of a great deal of scrutiny and adverse criticism, especially by the US administration. In particular, in November 2019 Ambassador Alice Wells, the principal deputy assistant secretary of State for South and Central Asia at the US Department of State, made public the US' concerns about CPEC, criticising the issues of cost, debt, jobs and transparency of Chinese investments in Pakistan. She noted how, «in contrast to the Chinese Communist Party, the United States leads a vision for the Indo-Pacific region that is free and open». She also called Islamabad to «ask Beijing the tough questions and insist on accountability, fairness and transparency». «Ask the Chinese government – she concluded – why it's pursuing a development model in Pakistan that significantly deviates from what brought China its own economic success».¹⁷ Pakistan's

17. United States Department of State, 'A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor', 21 November 2019.

Foreign Office and the Chinese Ambassador's reaction to Wells' remarks was immediate, with Beijing's ambassador to Islamabad, Yao Jing, saying he was «shocked and surprised» and asking the media to play an important role in countering anti-CPEC propaganda.¹⁸ Ultimately, the increased pressure exercised by the US was not particularly successful in weakening Sino-Pakistani relations. Of course, this is a far from surprising result, considering that the Sino-Pakistani alliance is a cornerstone both in the case of Pakistan's foreign policy and China's BRI strategy.

Less evident, but equally significant, is the case of Nepal. As noted by Matteo Miele, Nepal's leadership had to strike a careful balancing act in 2019 when managing its relations with the United States, China and India. The deepening ties between Kathmandu and Beijing, exemplified by the number and relevance of agreements signed during Xi Jinping's visit to the country in October 2019, were perceived as a threat both by India – which, as noted by Yogesh Joshi, considers China's inroads into its immediate neighbourhood a major concern – and the US, which is keen to cajole countries into its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. Overall, during 2019, Beijing's growing clout in Nepal was visible, with over 90% of foreign direct investment (FDI) in this Himalayan country coming from China. This, coupled with the deal signed in 2018 by Huawei to develop 4G infrastructure in Nepal, demonstrates that the relationship between Beijing and Kathmandu has become increasingly close.¹⁹

In Afghanistan, as Filippo Boni points out, the US remained the primary international actor in 2019, as shown by its proactive policy aimed at negotiating a peace deal with the Taleban. Peace in Afghanistan was an objective very eagerly sought by Donald Trump, in view of the approaching 2020 US presidential elections. China, nonetheless, continued to be a keen actor, attempting to mediate a political settlement in the country. Here too, as with the US, domestic considerations were paramount: no doubt, China's effort to stabilise its Western periphery was the main driver behind its engagement with Afghanistan.

Equally interesting is the case of Mongolia. The latter finds itself in the difficult position of being caught between her inevitable dependence on Russia and China, and the convenience of promoting positive relations with the US. As Axel Berkofsky reports in his article, 90% of Mongolia's exports are to China, and the latter accounts for more than one third of Mongolia's imports, in addition to being its major foreign investor. Similarly, Mongolia's economic relations with Russia have grown significantly in the past few years, as a result of the Kremlin's renewed interest in Mongolia as a potential transit corridor for goods and energy supplies to, and from, China. In this situation, Russia, Mongolia and China established, under the

18. 'Chinese Ambassador in Pakistan Yao Jing is shocked and surprised', *Times of Islamabad*, 23 November 2019.

19. Rupert Stone, 'China's silent foray into Nepal', *TRT World*, 21 October 2019.

auspices of the BRI, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) in 2014. Furthermore, in 2019 Russia pledged to invest US\$ 1.5 billion to be used to modernise Mongolia's railways. Against such backdrop of heavy economic dependence, Mongolia's decision to sign a Strategic Partnership Agreement in July 2019 with the United States caught many observers by surprise. The agreement came in the wake of the US Department of Defence's Indo-Pacific Strategy report, which referred to Mongolia as one of the «natural partners of the United States» in the region. The US' strategy – aimed at scoring a political point by obtaining Ulaanbaatar's support for the Indo-Pacific strategy – also included an economic component through the Mongolia Third Neighbor Trade Bill. Introduced into Congress on 10 April 2019, the Bill, in sharp contrast with the usual US trade policy under Trump, intended to grant Mongolian cashmere duty-free access to the United States, creating great potential for growth in Mongolia's cashmere and textile industry. Its *political* goal was offering the land-locked Asian nation an alternative economic option to the ones provided by China and Russia. As Berkofsky notes, Beijing's reaction to these developments was to warn «Mongolia not to 'misbehave'» by teaming up with Washington on a level «too close for comfort for Beijing». The whole episode, which at the time of writing had not yet reached its conclusion, demonstrates both the difficulties and opportunities for third countries, created by the escalating tensions between China and the US.

Another flashpoint in the US-China rivalry during the year under review was Vietnam. As shown by Nicola Mocci, in 2019 the Vietnamese economy witnessed two main developments related to the China-US confrontation. The first was the increase in Chinese FDI in Vietnam and the relocation of Chinese companies there. The second was the steep increase of made-in-China goods that were exported first to Vietnam and then – after being labelled as Vietnamese – re-exported to the US. Nonetheless, the attempt to bypass higher US tariffs did not pass unnoticed by the Trump administration. As pointed out by Mocci: «In June, the President himself described Vietnam as “almost the single-worst abuser of everybody”». More importantly: «Words were soon followed by deeds. The US Commerce Department imposed duties of more than 400% on steel imports from Vietnam».



In 2019, if the US-China increasingly-harsh contraposition was the main development in Asia, at least one other occurrence must be highlighted as characterising the year under review in many of the Asian countries analysed in the present Asia Maior issue. As observed in previous years, and in line with events in the remainder of the world, political freedom radically contracted. By looking at Freedom House scores for the countries included in this Asia Maior volume, we find six which are not-free (China, North Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan), four that are partly

free (the Philippines, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan) and only six that are free (Japan, Mongolia, Taiwan, Timor Leste, India, South Korea). However, one of the countries classified as free by Freedom House, India, includes a territory, indicated as «Indian Kashmir», that Freedom House itself classifies as «Not Free».²⁰

The snapshot given by Freedom House is possibly over-optimistic. It does not register the contraction of the spaces of freedom across the border, affecting – with very few exceptions – all kind of countries, from the «Not Free», to the «Partly Free», to those officially classified as «Free».

The most egregious example of a country «Not Free», which has seen a fast and conspicuous reduction of political liberty, is China. As documented by Silvia Menegazzi, under Xi Jinping's increasingly authoritarian leadership, even education – in an Orwellian move – has been transformed into a tool to mould the individual mentality according to the indications of the one and only leader.

Another example worth remembering, drawn from the class of countries classified by Freedom House as «Not Free», is that of Kazakhstan. As shown by Paolo Sorbello, in the Central Asian country, in spite of the unexpected decision made public in March by Nursultan Nazarbayev to step down from the presidency, the former President continued to be firmly in control of the ultimate power. Also, the harassing of opposition forces and independent media persons continued unabated.

Finally, among the countries characterised by Freedom House as «Not Free», the case of Myanmar is worth recalling. Even Myanmar is a most distressing example of political involution, in particular when one thinks of the high hopes once engendered by Aung San Suu Kyi and her democratic credentials. During the year under review, as shown by Matteo Fumagalli, there was no significant progress in the solution of the shameful problem of the Rohingya refugees. At the same time, a new insurrectional wave, led by the Arakan Army, started in the Rakhine state and spread throughout Myanmar's northern and eastern borderlands. At the closing of the year – when Aung San Suu Kyi was in The Hague, defending her country from the accusation of genocide before the International Court of Justice, and the campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections was underway – the hopes for any kind of significant democratic progress in Myanmar appeared to be illusory.²¹

20. Freedom House, *Countries and Territories* (<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>).

21. On the problem of the «authoritarian resilience» characterising the political system in Myanmar see: Stefano Ruzza, Giuseppe Gabusi & Davide Pellegrino, 'Authoritarian resilience through top-down transformation: making sense of Myanmar's incomplete transition', *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 49, Special Issue 2 (Autocracy Strikes Back: Authoritarian Resurgence in the Early 21st Century), July 2019, pp. 193-209.

Examples of the deteriorating situation of «Partly Free» countries are those offered by Malaysia and the Philippines. In Malaysia, as shown by Saleena Saleem, the political context was characterised by the eruption of a spate of ethno-religious controversies «that only served to exacerbate the inter-ethnic distrust». These controversies were promoted by the two main opposition parties' «polarising fear-mongering rhetoric», and were fed by «the ineffectual and disunited responses» of the coalition in power. Sadly, at the end of the year under review, Malaysian society appeared divided once again along communal lines. Ethno-religious ideologies were still a force to be reckoned with, with the potential to seriously damage social peace and political progress.

Even more worrying was the case of the Philippines. As Sol Iglesias and Lala Ordenes show in their article, under President Rodrigo Duterte the country was reverting from democratic to authoritarian rule. The authors detail how the process of democratic deconsolidation was progressively taking place in the country, through a systematic weakening of the opposition and attacks on media freedoms and human rights. These actions were coupled with an active erosion of democratic institutions, in particular the judiciary, and a simultaneous strengthening of the military and the executive.

Among the territories assessed by Freedom House, there is Hong Kong, which is classified as «Partly Free». During the year under review, this *de facto* city state was in the grip of a major democratic crisis, which, while less significant than similar developments in other parts of Asia – as exemplified in particular by the Philippines, discussed above, and India, on which more later – was closely monitored by the Western press. This conveyed the impression, at least in the West, that the events in Hong Kong were of epochal importance and a crucial struggle for democracy. Indeed, the Hong Kong crisis was serious and a struggle for democracy. Its importance, nonetheless, was undeniably inferior to other – sadly unreported by the Western media – analogous confrontations in other parts of Asia.

Once the above has been pointed out, it is safe to assert that the events in the city state in 2019 can only be fully understood by highlighting the interconnected nature of the different roots of the crisis. On the one hand, it was propelled by internal causes; on the other the position of the city state in the Chinese area of influence deeply conditioned the political space of the protest.

As Angela Tritto and Abdulkadir Alkan detail in their analysis, the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Bill protests represented the largest mobilisation of people in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China since the Hong Kong handover in 1997. The roots of the protests can be found in the shifting values and identities of the younger generation; nonetheless a full assessment of the dynamics of the Hong Kong struggle would be incomplete without its contextualisation within the wider framework of China's increasing global reach, for which Hong Kong represents «a key node».

At the closing of the year under review, no final result of the Hong Kong crisis was in the offing. Nonetheless, in the context of Hong Kong's geopolitical, strategic and economic importance for China, it is difficult to be optimistic about the success of the pro-democracy forces.

None of the above examples of the contraction of political liberties is, however, as worrying as the one represented by the political involution of a country that Freedom House classifies as «Free», namely India. Considered the world's largest democracy, India is usually viewed as a success story in managing diversity. However, since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, India has gone through a progressive erosion of its political liberties, well documented in previous Asia Maior issues. This erosion has become headlong after Modi's massive – and from many viewpoints unexpected – victory at the 2019 general election (discussed by Diego Maiorano). Since then, in Michelguglielmo Torri's appraisal, a «systematic and massive assault» on Indian democracy has taken place.

The on India's democracy was primarily articulated around two areas. First, two key articles of the Indian Constitution, which had guaranteed the autonomy of Jammu & Kashmir, the only Union state with a Muslim majority, were hollowed out and the state was *de facto* transformed into an internal colony brutally ruled through military force. Second, there was the attempt to modify the concept of Indian citizenship by introducing a religious criterion aimed at excluding persons of Muslim religion. While protests mounted in the country against this second decision of the Modi government, these two developments amounted to the most massive democratic crisis in India since the infamous imposition of the «internal emergency» regime of 1975-77, which saw then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi take over dictatorial powers.



To the above drawn picture of contracting political liberties, there are, nevertheless, some exceptions, in particular those represented by Taiwan – expertly analysed by Aurelio Insisa – and South Korea – knowledgeably discussed by Marco Milani. Particularly interesting, however, are the cases of two countries which Asia Maior examines for the first time in this issue: Mongolia and Timor Leste.

The small island state of Timor Leste is an enthralling case, on which it is worth briefly dwelling, if for no other reason than the immense amount of suffering and resilience which made the country a success story. In fact, the Timorese democracy is the outcome of a long and harrowing struggle against Indonesian colonialism, covertly supported by an Australia only interested in promoting its own egoistic national goal of exploiting the natural wealth of the Timor Gap. Although badly served by the UN, Timor Leste has succeeded in reaching not only independence but in creating a working democracy. In recent years this democracy has experienced some difficulties, but, as shown by Rui Feijó, these difficulties, far from signalling the

danger of an imminent democratic collapse, are those typical of the semi-presidential form of government chosen by the small island state. In fact, as argued by Feijó: «In any semi-presidential regimes the risk of conflict between a president and a prime minister representing different political forces is high, as shown by the well-known experience of France and many other countries having adopted this system». In turn, this results from the fact that, in the semi-presidential system, both the president and the prime minister enjoy «a direct electoral legitimacy that sustains their claims to a fair share of power». Hence, there is every hope that this small democracy will go on successfully pursuing the goal of enhancing both political liberties and economic well-being for its people.

Mongolia too is a most interesting case of democratic endurance and success. Surrounded by the two biggest authoritarian states in the world – China and Russia – this landlocked country has nevertheless been, since the 1990 revolution, a «democratic oasis». As in the case of Timor Leste, Mongolia's political system is semi presidential; in it a 76-member unicameral legislature cohabits with a directly-elected president. As pointed out by Axel Berkofsky, and as shown by the above-mentioned case of Timor Leste, this kind of system does not work at its best when the prime minister and the president are expressed by different political majorities. This has been the case in Mongolia during the past 30 years. Nonetheless – as pointed out by Berkofsky – the existence itself of such a political system is evidence of the fact that «democracy is functioning and that the parties and politicians in power or opposition are making use of their constitutionally-granted rights and mandates». In fact, in the case of Mongolia, this system has shown itself to be resilient enough to resist and stop the authoritarian temptations of President Khaltmaagiin Battulga, a populist politician sometimes described as the «Trump of the steppe». The resilience of Mongolian democracy became apparent in 2019, during a crisis which saw the attempt, piloted by President Battulga, to reduce the independence of the judiciary. The law aimed at this goal, initially adopted by parliament in March 2019, was however superseded by the passing of additional legislation in mid-November. The November legislation streamlined the powers of both the prime minister and parliament and stipulated that the presidential terms «will, from 2025, be limited to one six-year term as opposed to the current two four-year terms».



At the conclusion of our discussion of the contraction of political liberty in Asia – and to conclude this Foreword – it is opportune to briefly deal with a problem which, although not central to the essays included in this Asia Maior issue, is crucial in the anti-China discourse promoted by the Trump administration. This is the idea that China's influence abroad translates into the encouragement of the anti-democratic and authoritarian ten-

dencies so visible in the majority of Asian countries. While it is possible to produce examples, such as the Philippines, which would seem to strengthen this theory, there is no doubt in the mind of the authors of these lines that the theory in question is a simplistic and possibly disingenuous explanation of a much more complex problem. To try to begin to give a more correct answer, the first point that must be highlighted is that the decline of political liberties – in Asia as elsewhere – has both endogenous and exogenous causes. If we take what, in this Foreword, is indicated as the most worrying case of political involution in Asia, that of India, it is beyond doubt that no present-day exogenous influence is behind it. The extremely worrying, rapid and conspicuous erosion of democracy in India has nothing to do with China's influence or Chinese authoritarian ideologies. It is a phenomenon grounded on the intellectual historical roots of political Hinduism, or, as it is nowadays fashionable to call it, «Hindu nationalism». Of course, as shown by historical research, political Hinduism was deeply influenced by two closely connected foreign ideologies, namely Fascism and Nazism. But this happened in the 1930s and early 1940s.²² Since then, the nefarious ideology of «Hindu nationalism» has evolved autonomously, without any need of exogenous feeding, in particular from China, which political Hinduism considers as a dangerous enemy.

Coming to the exogenous influences behind the progressive crisis of political liberties in many Asian countries, and besides China's influence, another one is present and extremely dangerous, even if rarely or ever put under the focus of analysis by western or pro-West commentators. It is the influence of that extremely regressive version of Islam that is Wahhabi Islam. In previous decades its influence has spread throughout the world, but most particularly in Asia, thanks to the generous financial and organisational efforts on the part of that faithful ally of the West, but most particularly of the US: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.²³

Unfortunately, for reasons beyond the control of the Asia Maior editors, this issue is the second in succession without an essay focused on the most populous Muslim country world-wide: Indonesia. Indonesia, nevertheless, is a most glaring case in point, illustrating the deleterious effects of the Saudi Arabia-promoted Wahhabi Islam. As shown by the latest Indonesia-related essays published in Asia Maior and other research, during previous decades the open and tolerant Islam which was characteristic of Indonesia²⁴

22. E.g., Marzia Casolari, 'Hindutva's Foreign Tie-Up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35, 4, 22-28 January 2000, pp. 218-228.

23. For one of the few studies on Saudi Arabia's promotion of Wahabi Islam worldwide, see James M. Dorsey, 'Creating Frankenstein: The Impact of Saudi Export Ultra-Conservatism in South Asia', *Social Science Research Network*, 24 July 2016.

24. On the original characteristics of the Indonesian Islam see Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed. Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971 (1st edition 1968).

has been undergoing a most worrying mutation, becoming an increasingly intolerant, aggressive and anti-libertarian religious ideology, which has in fact narrowed the space of political liberty.²⁵ A similar involution, even if less pronounced, is visible in Malaysia, as shown by Saleena Saleem.

The decline of democracy and the contraction of political liberties in most of Asia – and in most of the world – is a quite serious and extremely worrying issue. The explanation of its causes – which, at the end of the day, is the necessary first step to counter this extremely dangerous and highly disquieting phenomenon – should not be held hostage to the anti-China discourse, promoted by the Trump administration to prop up the declining world position of the US.

Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocci & Filippo Boni

25. E.g. Tomáš Petrů, 'Jokowi's not so surprising re-election: A victory for «moderate» Islamism in Indonesia?', *Home Publications CEIAS Insights*, 30 May 2019; Edward Aspinall & Marcus Mietzner, 'Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia', *Journal of Democracy*, 30, 4, January 2019, pp. 104-118; Meredith L. Weiss, 'Indonesia in 2019. Democracy and Its Critics', *Asian Survey*, 60, 1, January/February 2020, pp. 109-116.

